The Appraisal of Power, the Power of Appraisal

Jenny Knight
Honorary Fellow, University of Brighton

About the Work:

A routine aspect of working life for most organisations is performance management, and one aspect of performance management is the annual or bi-annual appraisal process (called many things including performance reviews, staff development reviews etc). The effectiveness of this method of reviewing and ‘managing’ performance remains open to debate (Baker, T., 2013).

Baker (2013) describes appraisal meetings as potentially resulting on one-way monologues, and so where each party is not always hearing or reacting to the other until finally some powerful conversation takes place ....

About the Author:

Jenny is recently retired from academia, having worked as a Senior Lecturer at the University of Brighton Business School. Jenny’s use of her own poetry to teach organisational behaviour resulted in her being recognised with a teaching excellence award, and she is now an Honorary Fellow of the University of Brighton. The fellowship is in recognition of her contribution over and above her normal duties. Jenny continues to write poetry for publication as well as for community events. She now enjoys a more relaxed retirement devoted to children, grandchildren and creative enterprises.
A routine aspect of working life for most organisations is performance management, and one aspect of performance management is the annual or bi-annual appraisal process (called many things including performance reviews, staff development reviews etc). The effectiveness of this method of reviewing and “managing” performance remains open to debate (Baker 2013).

Baker describes appraisal meetings as potentially resulting in one-way monologues, and so this poem is written to reflect this experience and critically appraise the process from the perspectives of power, truth and pain.

The Appraisal of Power, the Power of Appraisal

Appraiser (to be referred to as 1)
Appraisee (to be referred to as 2)

1.

*I’m doing an SDR today*
*Appraisal, performance review, and I may*
*Be some time in this room, getting very hot*
*Move my table to one side and make sure there’s not*
*A barrier between the two of us so*
*We can’t share our perspectives, can’t use the GROW Model. Goal and reality, options, that stuff*
*Have I moved the chairs and the table enough?*
*All the papers will be on my lap here, I think*
*And when he comes in here I’ll get him a drink*
*Just some water, to put by his chair, and by mine,*
*On the floor – yes – I think the whole thing will be fine*

2.

*I’m sitting here*
*Outside her door*
*She’ll call me in*
*Just like before*
*She’ll move her desk*
*She’ll gaze at me*
*I wonder if it’s me she’ll see*
*I don’t need this*
*My life’s a mess*
*Things going on*
*Causing me stress*
*My job and I*
*We rub along*
*See eye to eye*
*I’m right, it’s wrong*
Don’t need this talk
A wasted day
I wish this ache
Would go away

1.

My greeting is calm and I’m smiling at him
I'm trying my best to be warm, welcoming
My stomach turns over, my face feels quite hot
The paperwork, chairs and the water – forgot
To open the window, to let in the air
We can’t breathe in this workplace – I wave at his chair.
An abandoned, relaxed and ‘wherever’ type wave
He responds with a sigh and sits down. Must be brave.

2.

I’m sitting here
Inside her door
She’s waved me in
And what is more
She’s pointed me
Towards my chair
I’m sitting here
She’s over there
Her papers slipped
Both of us sipped
Water, just now.
The floor’s too low.
She’s breathing in
We will begin

1.

No table is reckless! My papers just slipped!
I tried to look calm as I bent down and sipped
At my water, as he did. I don’t think he saw
The mild panic in my face – or did he ignore
It, or laugh at me, inwardly, knowing that I
Am no good at this process – I don’t know quite why.
I’m the boss, I’m in charge and the ball’s in my court
I’ll keep things professional, focused and short

2.

She smiles at me
God, make this quick
Tell me it’s good
Then maybe pick
An area for
‘Development’
Something to change
To ‘implement’.  
Some this or that  
Some bla bla bla  
Then do the notes  
My mind is far  
Away from here  
This heated tomb  
This strip-lit,  
Suffocating room

1.

*I’ll say something good. Then I’ll tackle the ‘weak’*  
*I’ll leave lots of silences so he can speak*  
*I’ll summarise, reflect back, use my EQ*  
*I’ve been on the training course – know what to do.*  
*His expression is blank and he stares past my face*  
*At the picture of me and the kids in some place*  
*By the sea – it’s my favourite – in a white frame*  
*I wish I were there now, playing a game*  
*With them both, like we used to – with a beach ball*  
*I wasn’t at home when they learned how to crawl...*

2.

Her and her kids  
I wonder where?  
Looks lovely – wish  
That I were there.

She finally died  
A long, slow death  
I wasn’t there  
For her last breath  
I was at work  
In open plan  
Doing some stuff  
Don’t think I can  
Remember what.  
I didn’t leave.  
Waited till six  
Then time to grieve.

1.

*It’s been a hard year, and of course he won’t know*  
*That demands on my time have made me feel quite low*  
*It’s the loneliness really, the feeling that I*  
*Should know how, should be good, shouldn’t have to ask why.*  
*I am smiling at him and I’m building rapport*  
*Open question, I’ll listen –I can’t do much more*  
*“How’s it been? The past few months? What’s good and what’s not?*  
*“How are things for you? Why, where, when, who and what?”*
(The six honest serving men – working a treat
He’s looking at me now – perhaps more upbeat?
And preparing to share with me how things have been
Open questions are marvellous – help you to glean
Information and get things kicked off, so they say
I wish I had worn something cooler today).

2.

So how’s it been?
Well it’s been shit
I won’t say that
I don’t want it
To last too long
Some platitudes
Say nothing wrong
No attitude
She’s very flushed
I’m very tired
She’s trying hard
To be admired.
"It’s been okay
A few hiccups
But we’ve coped well
With the mix-ups
And things have worked
At least I guess
They have because
There’s no real mess”.

At least not here
In this white box
Where thin, straight arrows
Join the dots
And boxes filled
With acronyms
And reports
Made of antonyms
And meetings
Full of synonyms
Keep it objective
Keep things clear
Anaesthetise me
From the fear
Of death and dying
And the stress
Of loneliness
There’s no real mess.

1.

He’s opening up, making things flow quite well
And he’s mentioned the mix-ups so no need to dwell
On the problems for too long, I’m pleased about that
That’s the difficult part for me, having to chat
About weaknesses, failings, development needs
I always feel nervous in case this precedes
Some discussions about my own management style
And some truths which will hurt, that I’ll take with a smile
But remind me of things said about me before
When I left home for work -" Need to see you some more-
Need to see you and talk with you – put down your phone -
You sit in your office, you’re working alone,
What’s the work for exactly when we are left here
With no sense of a future – your input is rare”.

I’m feeling so fragile – a lump in my throat
I’m worried that he will use some anecdote
To uncover a failure, weakness on my part
I’ve tried so hard lately – don’t want him to start
Picking holes, raising issues, exposing my flaws
They’re not my fault, actually. I’m not the cause.
He’s annoying me, judging me, taking the lead
None of this is my fault – it’s not what I need.

2.

Her face is red
Her eyes look wet
Don’t understand
Now I regret
The mention of
The mix-ups when
I said that things
Were fine and then
I used the word
‘Mess’ to describe
The state of things
Not as a jibe.
I’ve upset her
She’s at a loss
I’ve said something
To make her cross
I’ll rescue things
I’ll try my best....

1.

I need to get
Things off my chest
He asks too much
As they all do
I try so hard
I’m human too.
I’m sitting here
He’s sitting there
He’s so relaxed
Hasn’t a care
It’s not my fault
I just can’t find
The time for them
I’m so behind
With work and mail
And all the stuff
I have to do
I’ve had enough.

2.

I’m not sure what is happening here in this room
Was it something I said? Did I say things too soon?
She’s uneasy, distracted, unsettled, am I
Such a difficult subject? I just don’t know why
We are putting ourselves through this painful process
When I see in her face that she cares even less
Than I do, and it troubles her, haunts her to be
My manager, desperately managing me.
Doing all of the things the books say that she should
Saying the things that she really hoped would
Bring us closer, as colleagues, more empathy, then
I would be more engaged, more productive, again.
Doesn’t work that way, does it? No meeting of minds,
No heart in it, soul in it, two of a kinds.
You see life is more messy than charts can portray
And plans are derailed in a moment, a day
There is life and there’s death and there’s stuff in between
She died, I was here, sitting behind my screen
Doing stuff, moving papers and playing with words
There is life, there is death and then there’s the absurd.

1.

He doesn’t know
How much I long
To laugh, to cry
Do something wrong.
Let down my guard
Look in his eyes
Tell him about
The bright blues skies
In Crete. We were
On holiday
Long time ago
There’s not a day
When I don’t wish
For less of this
And more of that
To throw away
My thinking hat
All six of them
No strategy
No vision, mission,
Place to be
Except with them
Away from here
No judgement, failure,
Tension, fear

2.

Our words fall on the floor in this white painted tomb
On the cord carpet, soaking up crap in this room
In a day we won't know what we said or agreed
But she'll write it down, just in case, so we won't need
To recall it, we can't because we both don't care
For the record we'll have it, the words from thin air.
She is anxious, I'm bored, she is not in control
She's the boss, but she's not, she is playing a role
I'll agree, I will nod and I'll give her her due
I’ll accept words of wisdom, agree with them too
She’s ok – she’s just doing a job that they say
Is the job she must do – they have shown her the way
It’s the ‘human relations’ school, Y theory stuff
To relate to a human – why is it so tough?
In this box, on this carpet, a plasterboard place
Where feelings are hidden and we wear the face
That we hung on the hook when we got home last night
That we put on each morning. The mask is too tight.
Take it off, take it off – which one of us will be
The first one, the brave one – Me? Should it be me?

1. (To him)

You seem okay
I wish I knew
About your life
And about you
Don’t want to cross
Professional lines
But in your eyes
I see some signs
That I would like
To understand
Hope you don’t mind
This isn’t planned.

2. (To her)

Your kids look cute.
The picture’s nice
The place you’re in
Like paradise.
Wish I were there
Things have been tough
Since losing her
It is enough
To just get up
And face the day
I’m sitting here
Nothing to say

1. (to him)

Sometimes you wish
I’d go away?
And as for me
I miss those days
I miss the freedom
Miss the ways
We used to play
I miss it all
You missed her death
I missed them crawl.

2. (to her)

And in this box
We choose to crawl
We slowly die
Inside, and all
Our wounds and cracks
Are taped and bound
To stop the light,
To mute the sounds
Of tears and laughter
Joy and pain
Let in the light
Let’s live again

1. (to him)

You do your work
And I’ll do mine
We’ll meet and talk
Things will be fine
Tell me the truth
I’m only me
I’ll write stuff down
For you to see
But it’s my guess
That what we say
We will remember
Anyway.
2. (to her)
We will remember
Anyway
You seem alright.
You seem okay.
I will remember this, today.

1. (to him)
You seem alright
You seem okay
Thank you.
I think we found a way.
I will remember this, today.

References